Preserving and Promoting Bagan Lacquerware: A Holistic Approach to Safeguarding Myanmar Intangible Cultural Heritage(ICH)

Part 1: Introduction of the Product

Overview of the Product

Myanmar lacquerware, a centuries-old craft originating in the Bagan Archaeological Zone (**a UNESCO World Heritage site**), is one of the country's most significant cultural treasures. The intricate production process, which involves coating bamboo, wood, or fabric with layers of natural lacquer, is complemented by unique etching techniques. The designs often draw inspiration from Myanmar's rich history, including its mural paintings found in Bagan temples.

This art form represents the resilience and creativity of Myanmar's communities, providing livelihoods for artisans while fostering cultural pride. It is also central to Myanmar's tourism industry and appeals to global markets seeking authentic, eco-friendly, and handmade products.

Our project, *"Quality and Promoting Myanmar Lacquerware from the Bagan Archaeological Zone,"* aimed to preserve, enhance, and promote this craft while addressing the challenges it faces. We implemented a holistic *Public-Private-Community Partnership* (**PPCP**) model involving the Myanmar Lacquerware Association, Bagan Lacquerware artisans, government ministries, and private organizations.

Key objectives of the project included:

- Ensuring quality and sustainability by refining traditional production techniques.
- Developing innovative designs inspired by Bagan's mural art to meet modern market demands.
- Strengthening partnerships among key stakeholders to foster collaboration and growth.
- Securing IP protection for unique designs, including trademarks and geographic indications(GI).
- Raising awareness about the importance of cultural preservation and intellectual property rights.

Challenges Identified

While Myanmar lacquerware holds immense cultural and economic potential, it faces significant challenges that threaten its sustainability:

1. Artisan Displacement Due to Local Conflict & Disruption:
   The ongoing war and political instability in Myanmar have caused widespread displacement, severely impacting the lacquerware community, disrupting their livelihood, and limiting access to resources.
2. Lack of Ratification of the 2005 UNESCO Cultural Convention:
   Myanmar has yet to ratify the "*2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*". This lack of international commitment restricts the lacquerware community's ability to access global frameworks for cultural preservation and financial support.

3. Declining Youth Engagement:
   Younger generations are moving away from traditional crafts, drawn instead to urban jobs or globalized industries. This threatens the continuity of lacquerware skills and knowledge.
4. Intellectual Property Vulnerabilities:
   Without formal IP protection, artisans' unique designs are exposed to replication by commercial manufacturers, reducing Bagan lacquerware's market value and authenticity.
5. Market Barriers and Operational Restrictions:
   The local conflict has exacerbated logistical issues such as transport delays, supply chain disruptions, and inconsistent access to materials. Additionally, power outages and internet restrictions limit the ability of artisans and organizations to connect with wider markets and explore digital solutions.

Part 2: Detailed Activities Conducted by Our Team

Required Actions

To overcome these challenges, the project implemented the following key actions:

1. Organizing Development Meetings: Coordinating with related stakeholders/private institutions to establish timelines, assign responsibilities, and refine goals.
2. Skill Development Training: Conducting workshops to enhance artisans' techniques while documenting traditional processes for preservation.
3. IP Awareness Campaigns: Educating artisans and stakeholders about the significance of intellectual property protection.
4. Creating Mural-Inspired Designs and Enhance Traditional Etching Techniques: Designing innovative lacquerware products to appeal to both local and international markets and transferring unique etching techniques to the younger generation.

Team Activities

1. Organizing Development Meetings
Who was involved: Four core Myanmar delegation members, ministry representatives, trainers, and selected artisans/trainees.
Details:

- Held four development meetings to plan activities, assign roles, and address challenges.
- Discussed the main content of the project training, displacement issues, and strategies to include affected artisans in project activities.

• Reviewed the potential impact of Myanmar's non-ratification of the 2005 UNESCO Cultural Convention on international support.
• Timeline: Mid-September to early October 2024.
• Outcome: Meetings resulted in a comprehensive timeline, artisan inclusion strategies, and future policy advocacy recommendations.

2. Skill Development Training

Who was involved: Artisans, trainers, and Ministry of Religious and Culture - MORAC officials led by the project manager, Daw Ei Shwe Zin Myint, who was also a core member of the MI-MM delegation.

Details:

• A 5-day workshop trained 20 artisans, including 5+5 trainers and interested individuals, on advanced techniques and sustainable practices.
• Training included sessions on mural-inspired design innovation and discussions on the cultural significance of lacquerware.
• Documented traditional techniques through detailed guides and video recordings.
• Timeline: Mid to late October 2024.
• Outcome: Improved technical skills among artisans and created an archive of lacquerware techniques for future reference (safeguard).

3. IP Awareness Campaigns

Who was involved: IP experts from the Ministry of Commerce including Daw Margret, a core member of the MI-MM delegation, local artisans, and members of related ministerial representatives and private associations.

Details:

• Hosted two awareness sessions for 25 participants plus interested individuals and focused on trademarks, patents, and geographic indications (GI).

• Distributed brochures and created digital content/PP slides explaining IP benefits and Application processes.

• Explored partnerships with international organizations for future IP advocacy.

• Timeline: Mid to late October 2024.
(although we plan to hold it in Late November to early December 2024)

- Outcome: Participants gained knowledge of IP protection, and three designs were prepared for trademark applications and considered for setting up Geographic Indication(GI).

4. Developing Mural-Inspired Designs and etching skills.

Who was involved: Senior Artisans, traditional designers, and Mural/cultural preservation experts from MORAC:

Details:

• Collaborated with Senior artisans to create new lacquerware designs inspired by Bagan's murals, integrating both traditional motifs and modern aesthetics.

• Conducted feedback sessions with potential buyers to refine designs.

• Timeline: Throughout the October's training days.

• Outcome: A field visit to study Mural paintings of monuments in Bagan, such as *Wetkyi-In Gupyaukgyi, Phaya Thone Zu Hpaya, Lokatheikpan, and Ape Yadana Hpaya,* with official cultural/Mural experts and develop a product line of some unique items, with positive feedback from target markets.

Part 3: Results

Achievements

1. Development Meetings Completed: Organized four successful meetings, fostering collaboration among stakeholders.
2. Skill Development Training Delivered: Trained 20 artisans, enhancing technical expertise and documenting traditional methods.
3. IP Awareness Campaigns Conducted: Educated 20 artisans plus 10 interested individual participants on IP protection.
4. Innovative Designs Created: Developed mural-inspired products, expanding market appeal.
5. Collaboration Strengthened: Established strong partnerships between (**PPCP**) artisans(Bagan Lacquerware Community), associations, and ministries for sustained growth.

Measurable Results

- Artisans Engaged: 20 artisans trained, plus 10 interested individuals.
- Cultural Revival: Feedback from a certain amount of participants indicated a greater understanding of the cultural and economic significance of Myanmar Lacquerware.
- Documentation Completed: Created a digital archive of traditional techniques for future reference.
- Community Impact: Workshops provided a future ideal platform for Bagan Lacquerware artisans/community to reconnect and collaborate, fostering resilience in the face of ongoing challenges.
- Market Potential Expanded: Mural-inspired designs received positive feedback from the markets.

Part 4: Future Recommendations

Follow-Up Actions and Suggestions

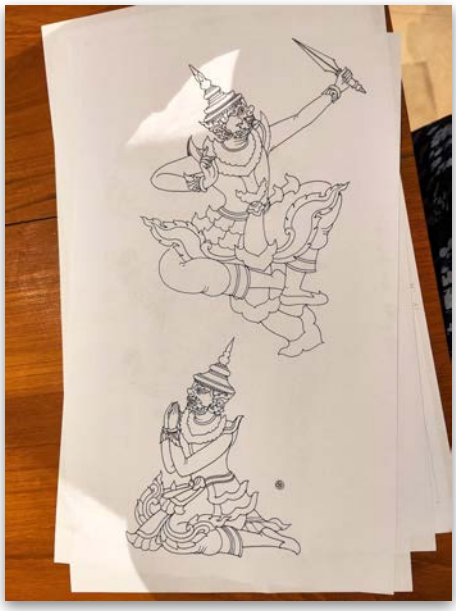
1. Advocate for 2005 UNESCO Cultural Convention Ratification:
    - Work with ministries and international partners to promote Myanmar's ratification of the cultural convention, unlocking access to global cultural support frameworks.
2. Enhanced Training Programs:
    - Conduct regular workshops on advanced techniques, business skills, and digital marketing.
3. Sustained IP Protection Efforts:
    - Expand partnerships with international IP organizations to support artisans in registering designs.
4. Resilience Building for Displaced Artisans:
    - Provide mobile production units and targeted training programs to ensure continuity amidst displacement and local crisis.
5. Youth Engagement:
    - Integrate lacquerware into educational programs and create mentorship opportunities for young artisans.

Conclusion

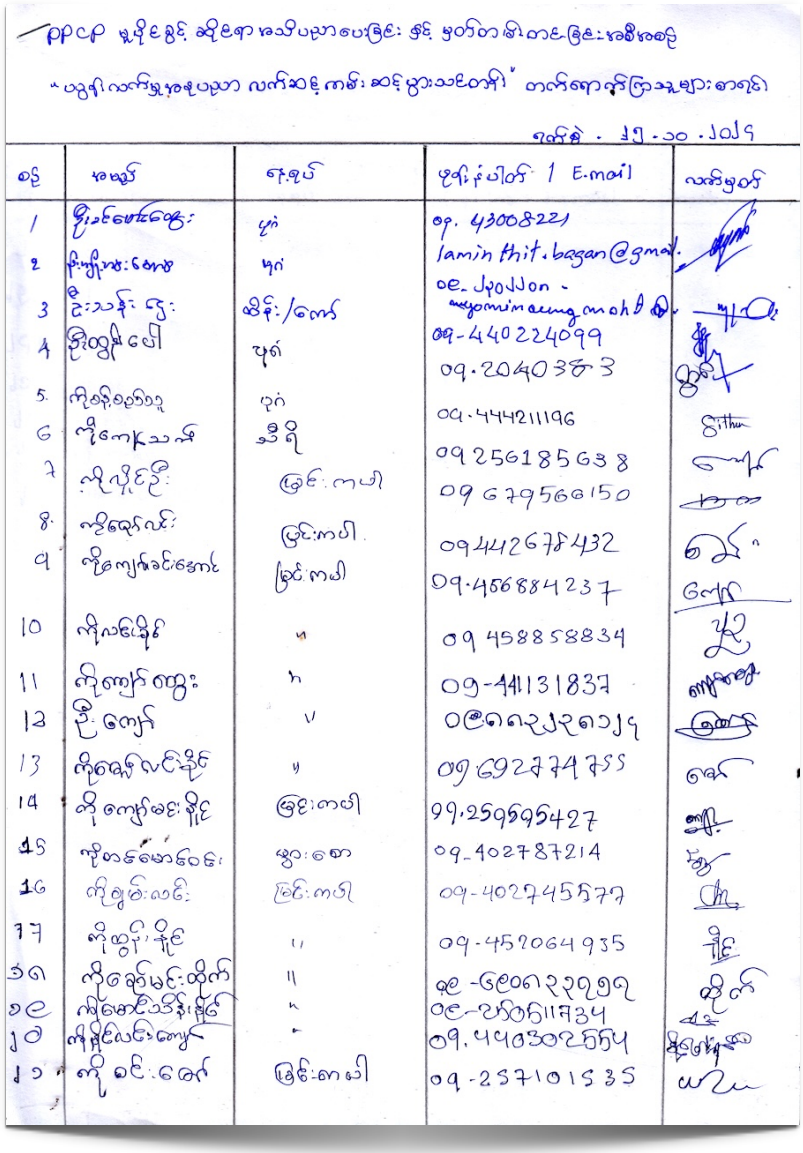
The *"Quality and Promoting Myanmar Lacquerware from the Bagan Archaeological Zone"* project has significantly improved in preserving Myanmar's cultural heritage, enhancing artisan skills, and fostering collaboration. While challenges like artisan displacement and lack of 2005 UNESCO Cultural Convention ratification persist, this initiative has laid a solid foundation for sustainable growth and innovation.

Artisan Workshops: artisans practicing techniques during training.

Field visit to gain the Mural-Inspired Designs



Artisan Workshops: Participation of Artisans and Interested individuals on (@ 25.10.24)



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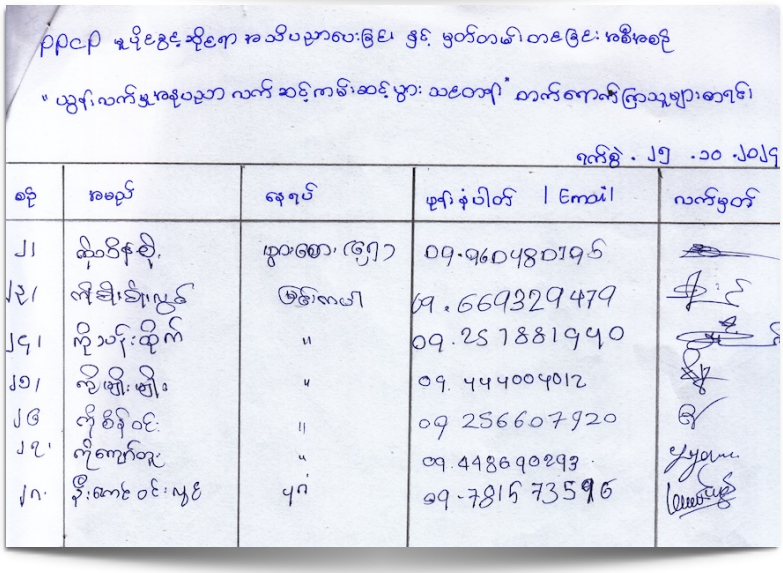

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Acknowledgment

We sincerely thank the Mekong Institute(MI) for your steadfast support and invaluable guidance throughout the Bagan Lacquerware project. Despite the local challenges and crises we faced, your unwavering commitment to cultural preservation and the empowerment of artisans has been the cornerstone of this initiative's success.

We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to collaborate in safeguarding Myanmar's rich heritage and for your belief in the resilience and creativity of Bagan's lacquerware artisans. Your efforts have empowered us to make a meaningful and lasting impact, and we look forward to continuing this important mission together in the future.

Sincerely,

Kyaw Myo Ko
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